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June's Jottings: February 1, 2017

February 2, 2017

One of the wonderful things I love about the UCC is what I call "one degree of separation." I have been a part of this denomination for my whole life, growing up in a small town UCC congregation and beginning to serve the wider church on conference committees in my 20s. I know many people in the UCC and it is always a source of grace and wonderment to me when I find those connections in unexpected places.

I was reminded of one of those connections in a local church newsletter from this past week. Rev. Bruce Schoup pastors Peace Church in Clemson, South Carolina. His article this week reminded me of how incredible this Conference is and the renewing and innovative ministry that happens every day. With Bruce's permission, I am excerpting a portion of his article. (Note: I was also taught in seminary by David Ray and later we were staff colleagues when I worked for the Maine Conference UCC.)

One of my favorite seminary classes was a course taught by David Ray on small churches. David Ray (1) asked a counter-cultural question about size, and (2) modeled bi-vocationalism as a choice rather than as necessity. I am going to focus on his counter-cultural thinking.

We live in a country that emphasizes size. If you are not big or at least growing, something is wrong.The question David Ray asked was, "When is a church too large?" The reason David Ray stressed smaller congregations is that he believed intimacy and relationship were important. Implied in David's reframing of the question is that smaller communities who often

are made to feel inferior, can and should hold their heads up because very good ministry is taking place inside their community. Still in this community an "outsized" ministry takes place in and around the life of Peace Church, UCC. (The link to Bruce's full article is here)

Last Sunday well over half of those in attendance at Peace had just participated in the Tri-County Women's March in Clemson that took place the day before and did not include four members who marched in Washington DC. Peace was awarded a Grass Top Grant from Neighbors in Need for their Tiny House Project (see related article). They have established a dynamic presence called PR(i)SM at Clemson University to reach out to the LGBTQ community. They are co-hosting a joint service/experience with Black Lives Matter, Greenville Chapter and bringing together a Remembrance Pilgrimage thatreflects on the recently reclaimed history of Clemson University (broken treaties, slavery, convict labor, exclusion) that has received the endorsement of the Clemson Area African American Museum. And they have received a Transforming Churches, Transforming Lives grant to produce radio spots featuring members of the congregation talking about values important to them and maybe different from the dominant social culture.

Bruce asks in the article, "Are we a small church? Yes. While we may wish we were larger in number, we are the right size to have an awfully big footprint." The Southeast Conference may be one of the smaller conference in the UCC but we have a big impact on the wider church in our record of new churches, innovative process within the Commission on Ministry, the financial support of our churches for ministry in the wider church, and the many, many people over the years who have served in national positions or on national boards and committees.

This is a small Conference with a big heart and a large footprint. And as I prepare to leave your bounds, I will take a story of ministry that transforms the world and will inform my understanding of ministry going forward. I know I will encounter some of you again as we journey in Christ's light and we will have a story to share with the nations. Thanks be to God.

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